CHOOSE LIFE
John 5:2-9
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Arthur Miller's Pulitzer-winning play, Death of a Salesman, written in 1949, is opening yet another time on Broadway. It is about a man who wants more for his family than he is able to provide. When it becomes clear that his dreams will remain dreams, his self respect, his sense of meaning, the vitality of his life begins a long and tragic process of decline. The play is powerful because of Miller's great genius - but also, I think, because of the brooding theme which runs throughout: namely, the futility of waiting for a future which is not going to come. Early in the play Willie's grown sons are talking about their life and their hopes for the future. One of them says:

> "All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager...I don't know what I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying, and it's crazy. But then it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, and car, plenty of women. And still...I'm lonely." (p. 19)

There is something universal about that experience. We invest an enormous amount of our lives, our energy, skill, passion, time - in the future. And sometimes it seems like our investment in the future is so heavy we have nothing left for living in the present. Sometimes it seems that the present is dull, unimaginative, a sequential waiting for something to happen, for the future to get here.

Once there was a man who had invested 38 years in the task of waiting. We encounter him lying on a mat, beside a large pool in Jerusalem, in 30 A.D. The pool of Bethesda, meaning "house of healing," has been excavated. It's a large double pool with porches on four sides and one on a divider in the middle. The pool was fed by an intermittent spring. When the spring flowed, the water on the surface of the pool splashed and danced and turned a reddish color. There was always mystery surrounding that phenomenon. It was held widely that a local spirit, or an angel of the Lord disturbed the waters and that the first person into the water during the disturbance would be healed.

And so, around the perimeters of the pool, under the porches, were the crippled, the sick, the aged, watching, waiting. Some surely had a friend or relative waiting with them, ready to assist as soon as the water started to churn. And some of them were alone, watching intently, anxiously hoping to scramble to the side as soon as it happened. And then there were some - and I have the sense that this may have been the majority - who were alone and who were watching less intently. These were the ones who had concluded that the future wasn't going to come, that they weren't going to make it to the pool first - not ever. They would continue going through the motions, to be sure. They would remain there, lying on their mats, but they were resigned to the status quo. Catholic scholar Raymond Brown observes that if this man were not so tragic he'd be amusing, "with his unimaginative approach to the curative matters...his crotchety grumbling about the 'whippersnappers' who outrace him." (The Gospel of John, vol. I, p. 209)

In time the adjustments had been made, the self-justifications carefully worded and rehearsed: "There is no one to help me, someone always pushes me out of the way and steps in front of me..." A whole new dynamic had emerged: a community of misery, devoted to enabling its participants to continue the rituals of life waiting for the future to happen. That community was important for the man; it allowed him to continue to engage in the charade. By common consent it allowed everyone to choose the status quo. There was something to be said, after all for life around the pool. It was not an unpleasant place to be. Passersby often left money for food. The man had his cronies with whom to pass the time of day, talk about yesterday's game, play a little pinochle. He had his bed to lie on.

The author of the fourth Gospel, who has arranged his material with an artist's eye for symmetry wants us to see something important about the new life occasioned by Jesus Christ. When Jesus discovers this 38 year veteran of waiting, he asks a basic question: "Do you want to be healed?" The man never answers that by the way, instead complains about his hard luck and his inability to make it into the pool on time. Jesus, however, is not interested in that at all. His concern, apparently, is with the man's will. "Do you want to be healed?"

In his book Love and Will Rollo May suggests that modern life conspires against the existence of a strong, healthy individual will. We are in a crisis of will according to May. Modern men and women feel powerless, victims of large global forces over which they have absolutely no control. It takes a strong sense of self and a strong effort to maintain the integrity and power of one's own will.

"Do you want to be healed?" What a rude question. Of course the man wanted to be well. Why else would he have spent 38 years waiting to get in the pool? And yet, it isn't a rude question at all. In actuality, it is **the** question. "What do you actually want? What do you choose for yourself?" Ruminating about the text, I thought about how unsettling and unlikely it would be for a physician to enter the examination room (after we have been waiting for something less than 38 years) and ask us, "Do you want to be well?" And then it occurred to me that a good doctor does ask that question. Not in those words, and perhaps not even consciously; but my guess is that the starting point for the physician's work is somewhere close to the patient's will to be well.

Certainly there is mounting evidence that without the will to be well, healing will not occur. After his now famous battle against a rare blood disease, Norman Cousins wrote: "The will to live is not a theoretical abstraction but a physiologic reality with therapeutic characteristics."

The psychologists, the physicians and the theologians tell us that to be fully alive has a great deal to do with a choice each one of us makes. There is, for each of us, a decision to be made - an act of personal will to be expressed. "If we want to live today, we must consciously will life," Theologian Juergen Moltman writes. "Apathy seems to be a characteristic sign of the illness of our society and of many individuals in it. Interest in life is crippled. The courage to be is weakened...We must learn to love life with such a passion that we will no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction. We must overcome

our own apathy and be siezed by a passion for life." (The Passion for Life, p. 20, 22). It is very difficult for us to understand, but something like that happens to the people who become advocates of change and revolution in third world nations. They choose to be on the side of life, on the side of justice and compassion, on the side of literacy and health care and enough food for their chidlren to eat, on the side of human dignity and human rights. For many people in the world it is not an easy choice because it means standing against the authorities and perhaps standing beside others with whom you would not ordinarily choose to stand. How does one choose life in El Salvador today, when the good we support has killed thousands and turned its head while Right Wing death squads execute tens of thousands; where even modest proposals to enhance the plight of the poor are regarded as communistic.

There is a choice to be made by each of us. Thirty eight years the man had waited. That's very close to a full career in our culture. This story asks us to look at our own lives. Are there echoes in my life of that man's self-justification, his weak rationalization? Do we hear our own voice saying "no one ever helps me, people always push ahead of me." Do we ever engage in that comfortable litany which starts out "someday I will...?" Someday, when I accomplish my goals, when I get the promotion, the office, the degree, the money - I'll be able to breathe easier. Someday, I'll spend time doing what is life-giving; with my spouse and children and friends. Someday I'll read more books and see more plays and write poems. Someday, I'll lose twenty pounds, quit smoking and take up pottery. But in the meantime I can't. Are there familiar echoes in that? To the question "Do you want to be healed? Do you really want things to be different in your life?" Wouldn't many of us be forced to say "not really; no thank you; the status quo may not be what I want, but it's not as bad as trying to change it."

William Sloane Coffin quipped recently that most of us "fear the cure more than the sickness." (The Courage to Love, p. 13). There were risks, after all, for the man in the story. When he obeyed the command of Jesus, picking up his bed to walk away, there was the risk that he might fall down. There was the very real uncertainty about the daily details of life. Deprived of alms for crippled people, where in the world does a newly-healed man find his next meal? No longer confined to his mat, where will he find a place to sleep? No longer part of the community of misery, where will he find new friends?

We prefer the security of the known to the radical insecurity of the unknown, as anyone who has ever changed jobs or moved to a new community, or altered careers, has discovered. It can be very frightening business; and the impetus to remain with the safety of the status quo is very powerful.

But we are not alive fully to the degree that we are unwilling to accept the risks of choosing life. The trouble with life on the mat is its deadly dullness. It is boring. It is not, finally, life at all.

This marvelous story is an illustration actually of the rebirth, the new life, which is so important throughout the fourth Gospel. Recall how Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again, and how much trouble Nicodemus had understanding that. "Can I enter a second time into my mother's womb?" he asked. Recall also the trouble we have with the idea of rebirth: how the phrase "born again Christian" has come to be synonymous with everything that makes us uncom-

fortable about public religion. When the conversation turns to rebirth in Christ, we Presbyterians ordinarily start heading for the exits. What offends us, of course, is the currently popular conversion dynamic which involves an emotional upheaval, and acceptance of Jesus as Lord and then the adoption of a new vocabulary to describe the experience to one's friends. But what if rebirth means something like what happened to the man beside the pool? What if it means getting up and walking into the future? What if being born again means choosing life instead of death, the present instead of some ethereal future? What if rebirth means falling passionately in love with life?

In many of D. H. Lawrence's poems there is a strong hint of Christian theology. Listen to one which I believe can be a commentary on our text:

"As we live, we are transmitters of life...
And if, as we work, we can transmit life into our work,
Life, still more life, rushes in to compensate, to be ready...
Give, and it shall be given to you
Is still the truth about life..."

Conf - used by early church 21 Baptism

In faith, as in life, Jesus calls us to lay aside old securities, to stand up and against all odds, sometimes in the face of our better judgment, to walk into the future - fully alive. We would be more comfortable waiting. We would rather wait till our doubts are resolved, till the difficult questions of faith are answered before we venture anything. We believe, but not nearly enough to try something new; to let go of old prejudices, to risk giving part of ourselves: our money, our time, our love - to someone, some cause that needs us. Of course we believe, but our position remains on hold.

"There is not one of us who does not need to be converted," William Sloane Coffin wrote, "not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to full life itself." (op. cit., p. 12). The early church theologian Irenaeus put it wonderfully: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news about a God who is on the side of life: a God who sets before his people the choice between life and death; the God who will lead them and strengthen and nurture them always when they choose life. It is not about an abstractly neutral deity who passively watches the affairs of his people, but a passionate God, a lover, a God who gets involved in life with his people; who created life good, and who is honored best when that good gift is fully lived.

The Gospel is about a God who so loved the world, he gave his only son that people might live fully. Jesus, the Christ, continues to surprise us with a love that does not call us away from life, but deeply into life. Jesus keeps surprising us by challenging us when we settle for something less than life, when we opt for the status quo instead of creative change in our own lives. The Gospel is about a Lord who loves us so much he wants us, wills us to be fully alive; a Savior who invites us to choose life, to stand up and walk, to follow him into our future. Amen.